

Radical Middle Way Transcripts

Shaykh Hasan Le Gai Eaton during The Radical Middle Way Launch

One of the definitions of Islam is that it is the “Middle Way” because it is a religion of peace and peace is only at the centre of things and never at the extremes. There are many ways of understanding the concept of the Middle Way. The first one I want to deal with relates to two different forms of excess: one is fanaticism, violence and terrorism, and the second is consumerism.

Both are forms of self indulgence. It seems odd to define the path of violence as a form of self indulgence. Anger, just like lust, begs to be released and begs to find expression and those who are consumed with anger but must kick it out in the some way or another. This may be apply to suicide bombers who are so possessed with fury and dismay that they must find a way of expressing it and in the end the only way that they it is through self destruction.

I would like to share an example of this from my own experience. As many of you know, in 1982 the situation in the Lebanon took a turn for the worse and Palestinian refugees were massacred in Sabra and Shatila camps. It happens that at the time I was working at the Islamic Cultural Centre and there was a colleague of mine working with me, who was the mildest of men: moderate, gentle and certainly not aggressive. But on the day the news of the massacres broke, he said to me, “I dare not go out into the streets today because I know I am going to hit the first person I pass.” This was a clear demonstration that anger, unless it is thoroughly controlled must find an outlet. That outlet may well be to strike at someone or people who may have nothing to do with the case at hand, hence the very ready and all too frequent killing of the innocent as a way of expressing the anger that some of our brothers feel.

Anger is a form of drunkenness. Alcohol is prohibited because it makes us drunk but we often forget that there are many forms of drunkenness and they all have something in common. The drunkenness of anger is just as misleading as the drunkenness of alcohol. It is just as liable to upset judgement, to make us incapable of effective action, because effective action relies on sober judgement. In practice, those who are seized by such anger, lose logic and rationality. They become ineffectual and less effective in achieving their ends.

That leads me to a digression. When I look back on the destruction of the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, I often shock people when I say that it was like a pinprick - no more than a pinprick. It is extraordinary to me that people have forgotten that a short time ago all of us lived under the greatest threat that human beings have ever faced: the very real and very actual threat of nuclear war. And this is why I tend to dislike the term “terrorism” and references to “terror” because I think that it is extremely important to use words with their correct meaning.

Terror is a big word. If somebody is terrified, they are trembling, they are sick in the stomach, they turn white, they cannot sleep, they cannot eat. Do we know anyone who is 'terrified' by the prospect of a possible bomb on a bus or in the Tube? There are people who worry but they are not terrified. Terror is too strong a word for this. Again the comparison is obvious.

When we lived under the threat of nuclear war, and especially during the Cuban Missile Crisis, where we came - as is well recognised now - within a whisper of nuclear destruction, were we terrified? We had good reason to be, but were we? We were not. People went on with their lives normally. The misuse of words is dangerous and because terror is a big word, it can justify a big reaction. 9/11, which I have suggested was a pinprick, has been used as an excuse for the invasion of Iraq and the above all curtailment of liberties dear to British people and the American people. If you can persuade people that something absolutely dreadful is threatened then you can make them complacent, as you deprive them of their liberties.

So on one hand we have the extreme of violence. On the other hand we have consumerism. The world, especially the West, is consumed by consumerism. The Quran refers to the greed for more and more and condemns it absolutely. We today are encouraged to be greedy through advertising. The government wants us to spend, spend, spend, because that, we are told, is good for the economy. The world is flooded with unnecessary goods which we are encouraged to buy. One reason that we have people, particularly in England, working appallingly long hours, with little chance to be with their families or energy to be spend time with their children is not only to "make ends meet" but also to buy a better television, a better this and better that - things that are not essential and not necessary. Islam clearly condemns excess and excessive greed is certainly and very powerfully condemned. But we don't recognise that we have become greedy people. It has become normal to want to better things. But in demanding them and buying them, we are contributing to the depletion of the resources of the planet and this is something that is easy to forget because we will not see the disaster of this course of action - it is our children and grandchildren who will suffer. We have used up the world's resources in the past century in a way that has never happened in the past and yet we continue to pollute the earth. One example is travel, as we dash from one place in the world to another in aircraft. During the war, I remember, there were notices posted all over the place saying "is your journey really necessary?" I wish those signs were still there. Most journeys are probably not necessary and yet every aircraft that is taking off is adding to the pollution that is so dangerous to the planet.

This all means that there is another characteristic of the Middle Way which people will mention and that I am going to challenge. That is tolerance. It struck me recently because we are always telling people that Islam is a tolerant religion. So I looked up the word in the dictionary and found out that it comes from a Latin word which means "to endure evil" and in classical English usage it means to put up with things that we don't like, but also to put up with things that we put up with that we shouldn't put up with. That's not what most people today understand as tolerance. As Muslims we are commanded to be compassionate, to be understanding, and to use our intelligence in understanding other peoples. We are certainly not commanded to take an entirely helpless attitude in the face of evil.

One of the terms use to describe the Quran is "the Criterion" - the criterion of good

and evil. We, as Muslims, are required to make judgements. That is a delicate task as we are human and our judgement can be fallible and often unreliable. Nonetheless, we must have some opinion when we face what is palpably evil, because we are commanded that if we can change it by hands, then we ought to use our hands. If we can change the evil by speech, then we must use speech. If we are so powerless as to only change it by our hearts, nonetheless we must change it by our hearts by condemning it.

This is a huge responsibility. In the early days of Islam, it is said that those who were called upon to act as judges for the community, when asked to make judgement, often trembled when required to give one, fearing it might be the wrong one and be condemned by God for not exercising their responsibility properly. We must acknowledge an element of doubt, but seeing a scale between yes and no we must dwell in the centre and in all humility make judgement as best as we can.

Finally, an essential feature of the Muslim soul and mentality is a sense of proportion and we are helped in this by the example of Messenger of Allah as this was one of his great characteristics: a perfect sense of proportion, to put things in the right order and where they belong. That is extremely difficult and to do that we need his example, just as we need the counsel and guidance of the Quran.

Much then is required of us as Muslims. But that is the price we pay for the privilege of being Muslims. We cannot shrug our shoulders and we have to hold firmly to the Middle Way which is Islam. In doing so to hope that we will please our Creator.



The Late Shaykh Hasan Le Gai Eaton (1921 - 2010)

Shaykh Hasan Le Gai Eaton was born in Switzerland on January 1, 1921, and educated at Charterhouse School and then at King's College, Cambridge. Shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War he was commissioned into the British Army.

Eaton converted to Islam in 1951 in Cairo at the hands of the man who was to be his foremost mentor, the British Sufi Martin Lings; through Lings Eaton was brought into direct contact with Frithjof Schuon, whose teachings were to increasingly fashion the mature Eaton's intellectual orientation and spiritual life. From 1977 to 1999, Eaton served as a consultant to the Islamic Cultural Centre in London, where he also edited the respected journal entitled *The Islamic Quarterly*. It was during these decades that Eaton made a major contribution to the expanding British Muslim community, both as writer and broadcaster, as well as in the capacity of advisor and counsellor to those, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, who were particularly interested in Sufism, the inner, mystical tradition of Islam. For it was this dimension of the faith which had attracted him to Islam, and it was this dimension which dominated his two major Islamic works, *Islam and the Destiny of Man* (1985), and *Remembering God—Reflections on Islam* (2000).

Charles Le Gai Eaton died on February 26, 2010—the same day as the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, according to the Muslim calendar.

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